

## **Water threatens museum, artifacts**

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In 1993, after a rainy summer, the ground became saturated and when the sump pump failed, the museum's lower level flooded. Two inches of moisture can be disastrous in a museum. The resulting humidity can ruin irreplaceable artifacts. This article was written after the water was removed.

Maybe it's a character flaw, maybe not. Either way, I tend to underestimate the severity of problems until I'm stuck in them ankle deep, but even two inches at the wrong time can be pretty rough. When the phone rang at my home Sunday afternoon, and the museum attendant said that there was some water on the floor of the lower level, I thought, "Well, I suppose that's not surprising with all of the rain we've had." I made some phone calls, rounded up a couple of volunteers, and drove to work.

Earlier in the summer, we'd noticed the floor tile starting to curl and to pull away from the cement. With the dampness in the ground, there was nothing we could do until things dried up. After all, this is 1993, the year of the flood – the year of Noah's Ark jokes. Everyone is being affected. But this was different. The entire floor wasn't covered with water but we had small lakes or big puddles (depending on how you'd describe them – actually running streams is probably a better choice of words) over half of the floor. We discovered that the museum floor tends to slope in the wrong directions and not always towards the drains. We do have two sump pumps, but apparently on Saturday night one of them decided to quit working.

Well, more phone calls – another volunteer rounded up – and a frantic pursuit of cleaning-up tools. With two push brooms, two squeegees, a mop bucket with wringing apparatus, and a wet/dry vac all in operation, we thought we'd make short work of the problem.

However, where does water go, when the ground is so saturated? Well, in this situation, the water decided to continue coming through the wall and up through the floor.

When we realized that we couldn't stay ahead of it, we started moving display items up to places of safety. We'd recently begun collecting Wilson and Farmstead items, and had them temporarily stored in the area that will eventually be an Albert Lea meat-packing exhibit. Thank heaven, one of our staff members had placed everything up on 1 X 2s, so the damage was minimal. Anyway, transferring them to a safer place eased our minds considerably.

As one volunteer worked to get the sump pump activated, the rest of us mopped, swept, and squeegeed for almost four hours.

I never knew that you could push water across the floor in front of a broom, creating a wake mindful of boating on Fountain Lake; or that I would someday be mopping water out of the furnace room realizing that it was coming in faster than I was pushing it out.

Eventually, the sump pump was repaired, and things began drying out.

The museum story cannot compare to the thousands of flood stories that we'll be hearing for years to come. Yesterday, I visited with a lady who works in a restaurant that overlooks the Des Moines River. She told me of standing at the window and watching a house floating down that swollen river, of watching it explode when it hit the bridge, and then of barely making it home before they closed her only access.

We need only drive outside of Albert Lea to see fields that are under water and others that will produce minimal crops. We need only drive down Main Street to see what's beginning to look like another permanent lake inside the city limits.

Yes, the museum's flood story may appear small in comparison; but when I think of the irreplaceable, Freeborn County items that could have been lost, our problems seemed pretty large. "A million thanks" to the volunteers who gave up their Sunday afternoon to help to save this part of our county's heritage.